

Romans 7:7-25 Extra Material Wretched Man Controversy

Introduction: This special lesson is in addition to the regular lesson on Romans 7:7-25.

Does the wretched man of Romans 7 embody the normal Christian life — or — is this Paul's testimony of what it was like to be under the law before Christ?

Is Romans 7:7-25 the AD Paul or the BC Paul?

Evidence is given for both positions.

Common Ground: The teaching of Romans 6 is not that sin is dead in us but rather that we are dead to sin. It is generally agreed upon that within every believer there is a war raging between the flesh and the Spirit.

ESV **Galatians 5:16-17** . . . walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other . . .

The Problem: The controversy concerns the correct interpretation of the wretched man passage of Romans 7 (*read aloud 7:14-20, 24*). John MacArthur noted that Romans 7:7-25 “has been a battleground for interpreters and theologians and expositors of Scripture. Some say that these are . . . the expressions of a non-Christian. Others say they are the expressions of a Christian.”

Speaking of Paul's letters, Peter wrote:

ESV **2 Peter 3:16** There are some things in them that are hard to understand . . .

This is not a conservative/liberal issue. When unbelievers mocking say, “You don't take the Bible literally, do you,” it is because they see it as a legend that only Neanderthals still believe. It is important to note this is an intramural debate within the household of faith among those who believe the Bible. It is not a literal versus legend controversy. Those who disagree with whatever your view is are not necessarily liberals!

Following are some arguments for the view that the wretched man of Romans 7 is Paul speaking of himself as a believer — the AD Paul — and is presenting an important part of the normal Christian life. Following each point is a response offering a reason why the wretched man is the BC Paul who wrote to explain why sin necessarily dominates those who are under law rather than grace. (For a fuller presentation of this few see the previous lesson).

1. Experience: Romans 7:7-25 reflects the normal Christian life because this is my experience, describing exactly how I feel.

Response: While it is true that Christians often do feel the tensions expressed in 7:7-25, we are not to interpret the Bible according to our experience. The question is not, “What is your experience?” Rather, the issue is, “What is Paul teaching?”

2. Change in Verb Tenses: The first paragraph (7:7-12) is in the *past* tense and expresses the experience of the BC (lost) Paul. In the second paragraph (7:13-25), the verb tense changes to *present* tense, reflecting the present and on-going experiences of the AD (saved) Paul and every true believer.

Response: Both paragraphs reflect the BC Paul. The second paragraph graphically utilizes the “historical present tense” used by Greek authors for vividness in recounting past events. The first paragraph set the context (Paul’s BC life) and the second paragraph gave present tense historical vividness to Paul’s past experience under law (before accepting Christ). It does not reflect the normal Christian life.

3. Change in Circumstances: In 7:7-12, sin had outright killed Paul (7:9). He was dead. It was the BC Paul. However, in the second paragraph Paul is alive and battling sin (7:22-23), indicative of the AD Paul after being made alive in Christ.

Response: Both paragraphs reflect the BC Paul’s losing battle with sin. He continues to be dead in the second paragraph (7:13, 24). Paul was spiritual zombie, dead, unable to win, but still struggling.

4. Different Prepositions: Just as we might say Christians are to be in the world but not of the world, in an opposite but similar way the AD Paul was of the flesh but no longer in the flesh. Romans 8:9 categorically declares that Christians are “not in (*en*) the flesh.” Clearly, the AD Paul was not “in” the flesh. However, in 7:14 Paul said he was “of the flesh”, meaning he still had to battle sin in his life. Thus the AD Paul was *of* the flesh (7:14) but not *in* the flesh (8:9), an important distinction.

Response: There is no substantial difference between being in the flesh as opposed to being of the flesh. The Greek for “in” is *en* (8:9). However, in 7:14 there is no underlying Greek preposition for “of”. There is no preposition at all. Paul simply wrote, “I am flesh” or “I am carnal” (KJV) or “I am fleshly”. The translators supplied the word “of” to make it more readable (“flesh” is a nominative adjective). It is a very fine splitting of theological hairs to claim a distinction between being in the flesh versus of the flesh. They are in essence synonymous terms.

5. A Regenerate Attitude: Paul's delight in God's Law (7:22a) could only be that of a saved man. No lost man could love God's law in this way.

Response: It is not true that only a Christian could delight in God's law. Psalm 119 records over and over again the author's love for and delight in God's Law. The psalmist lived long before Jesus and did not have the Holy Spirit in the same way Christians do. Though he loved the Law, like Paul he had no ability to keep it. Thus Romans 6:14 declares:

ESV Romans 6:14 . . . sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

The love for God's law would be used by God to show elect Jews their sinfulness and need for a righteousness that comes apart from the Law through faith in Christ.

6. The summary statement (7:25b) speaks of the AD Paul: Paul's cry for deliverance is uttered in 7:24, the answer (Jesus) is given in 7:25a and a restatement of Paul's struggle against sin as a Christian is given in 7:25b.

Response: Though 7:25a is indeed the answer to the dilemma, 7:25b is merely a summary of what was written in 7:7-24. It is the cry of Paul as an elect Jew under the Law. All of Romans 6 and 7:1-6 make it clear that we are not under the law — that we died to Law and have married Christ. The wretched man is a man under the law without the ability to obey the Law.

7. Other Considerations: 1) Some argue that the suffering and groaning mentioned in Romans 8 is specifically with reference to the misery expressed in Romans 7 as each Christian experiences the wretched man struggle on a daily basis. **2)** In addition, some have concluded that Romans 7 does not match Paul's experience as an unregenerate Jew. Based on other passages, they feel Paul was a self-righteous Pharisee who outwardly conformed to the Law and had few inner doubts. Thus the wretched man must reflect the sentiments of Paul as a believer.

So What?

No matter which view a person holds, there is agreement we are to "know" (6:3, 6) that we are no longer enslaved to sin, we are to "consider" (reckon, 6:11) that we are dead to sin and we are to "present" our bodies to God as instruments of righteousness (6:13v-14, 19). Even if Romans 7 describes part of the struggle with sin that Christians face, we are not to live (wallow) in Romans 7. We are to press on to the victory of Romans 8.

ESV Romans 8:2 . . . the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

• You can hear this lesson being taught at www.SermonAudio.Com/NTRF.

Stephen E. Atkerson

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